Computer Conferencing Functions and Standards

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Abstract: This paper makes a comprehensive inventory of functionalities often available in computer conferencing systems. Each function is described, and the terminology used to refer to this function in well-known systems is included. The paper further discusses why standardization of computer conferencing is of value, and which different interfaces can be covered by such a standard. A short introduction to current models for standards in this area is included. Finally, the design and user interface of one particular conference system, SuperKOM, is shown.

Keywords: computer conferencing, bulletin board systems, ISO, CCITT, terminology, KOM, SuperKOM, EIES, groupware, computer-supported cooperative work, group communication, message handling, electronic mail, standardization.
Introduction

This chapter consists of several parts. The first part describes the main functions in computer conferencing systems, both functions which almost all systems have, and functions only available in a few systems, but of value for distance education. For each function, the chapter describes how the function is implemented in some well-known conference systems and which terms are used to describe it. The chapter can be used as basis for a wish-list when procuring conference system software.

The second part discusses how standards for computer conferencing can be developed and describes the status of work in this area within ISO and CCITT.

The third part discusses the design of one particular conferencing system, SuperKOM, whilst the fourth and final part presents the main principles of computer conferencing as seen from the user interface of one particular system, the SuperKOM system.

Computer Conferencing Functions and Terminology

Figure 16.1 gives a pictorial introduction to the main terminology used in computer conferencing. The list which follows presents, in sequence, the functions displayed by conferencing systems, and indicates the terms used to name them in a variety of different existing systems. ¹

¹The various terms used in different systems are given with the system name in parentheses. By (ISO) is meant the proposed terminology in the latest version of the ISO/CCITT working paper, to become a forthcoming standard for computer conferencing. The standard is not ready, so the term may change [7]. By (KOM family) is meant all the systems in the KOM family of conference systems: COM, PortaCOM [13] and SuperKOM [11, 12]. By (EIES) is meant both EIES1 and EIES2 [15,17].